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MOVIE REVIEW

In Claude Chabrol's Film 'The Bridesmaid,' a Mama's Boy Meets a Femme Fatale

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First Run Features

Benoît Magimel plays a man fixated on a stone bust that resembles both his mother and his lover in Claude Chabrol's film "The Bridesmaid."

The deliciously twisted world of [Claude Chabrol](#) turns on a different axis from our own, though a closer look always suggests discomfiting similarities. In "[The Bridesmaid](#)," the latest of his works to be released in the United States, Mr. Chabrol again takes up a sharp instrument and directs it at one of his favorite targets, the family. Yet while his aim remains true, his touch has become gentler, more forgiving — perhaps as a consequence of his age (76), perhaps in deference to the contributions of his son, the film's composer, Matthieu Chabrol, and of his wife, Aurore Chabrol, its script supervisor.

Whatever the case, "The Bridesmaid" certainly presents a looser, more relaxed Mr. Chabrol, in both intellectual and formal terms, than do midcareer masterworks like "[Les Biches](#)" and later successes like "La Cérémonie." Once again, there are a family and a crime, as well as the crime that is the family, one whose pathology is suggested by smiles and eyes that always seem a bit too

bright, and by the fantastically ugly flowered wallpaper that covers much of their home like funeral wreaths.

When the film opens, the two daughters, Sophie and Patricia (Solène Bouton and Anna Mihalcea), are parked in front of a television, soaking up a local tragedy and engaging in a familiar spectator sport: the misery of others.

The mystery of empathy pervades Mr. Chabrol's work, which is full of sociopaths, some charming, others not. One of the least appealing is surely Senta (Laura Smet), the femme fatale with cat's eyes who, after meeting him at a wedding, sweeps Sophie and Patricia's older brother, Philippe (Benoît Magimel), off his feet. A mama's boy who looks to be in his late 20's, Philippe has a steady job and the trust of his employer, selling bathroom fixtures principally, it seems, to lonely older women. If he appears especially well suited to these demanding clients, it may be because he still lives at home with his dotting mother, Christine (Aurore Clément), a tremulous blonde with animal-print coordinates and what in an American film might be called boundary issues.

Filmmakers often run from unlovable and unlikable characters, or, if they're American, seek a cure or a punishment for souls so afflicted. Mr. Chabrol has never bowed to the notion that characters must be likable (or, in the vulgar parlance of Hollywood, someone you can root for), knowing full well that all they need be is worthy of our attention. It's no accident that the only truly appealing character in "The Bridesmaid" is a foulmouthed derelict (Michel Duchaussoy), who burrows into a pile of rubbish parked on Senta's property. You may not root for this tramp, but you may appreciate his earthy laugh and symbolic importance, particularly in light of both the bourgeois and bohemian worlds from which he's so pointedly excluded.

The tramp figures in the murder that eventually figures in the story and that plays almost as an afterthought. Written by Mr. Chabrol and Pierre Leccia, and based on the novel of the same title by Ruth Rendell, the film has a vague narrative thrust that is itself a red herring. You wait for something to happen, not necessarily realizing that the most important thing is happening in front of you, in the family members' exchanges with one another and, significantly, in Philippe's fixation on a stone bust that looks somewhat like his mother,

somewhat like his lover, and that once had pride of place in the family yard. (It's hard to say which is chillier here, a stone that looks like a woman or a woman with a stone-cold heart.)

Although the bust seems like a fetish object, it's more representative of Philippe's fossilized humanity than an emblem of sexual perversion. In many respects, Philippe, his sisters and his mother, each of whom presents a smiling front to the world, are not all that different from their beloved stone bust. It's no wonder that Philippe lavishes the bust with kisses, stroking its smoothly carved cheeks much as he strokes Senta's curved body. And no wonder, too, that when the worst happens in this deceptively understated and finally ferocious film, Philippe seems to shatter into a thousand pieces, much like a stone dropped from a very great height, much like a man whose mask has finally and irrevocably been forced from his face.

THE BRIDESMAID

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by [Claude Chabrol](#); written (in French, with English subtitles) by Pierre Leccia and Claude Chabrol, based on the novel by Ruth Rendell; director of photography, Eduardo Serra; edited by Monique Fardoulis; music by Matthieu Chabrol; production designer, Françoise Benoît-Fresco; produced by Antonio Passalia, Patrick Godeau and Alfred Hürmer; released by First Run Features. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Benoît Magimel (Philippe), Laura Smet (Senta), Aurore Clément (Christine), Bernard Le Coq (Gérard), Solène Bouton (Sophie), Anna Mihalcea (Patricia) and Michel Duchaussoy (the Tramp).